

Local Farms and Ball State University Dining Services

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The local food movement has taken off throughout much of the United States in the last several decades but there are still limitations to its success in certain arenas. Here in East Central Indiana, many farmers are producing crops and other agricultural products using methodologies that are sustainable, but it can be difficult for them to find an outlet for their products. For small-scale farmers, expansion can also be a trying process, particularly without significant financial investments from the community, regional businesses, and other similar entities. Through forming a relationship between Ball State University's Office of Dining Services and several local farms, I have begun the work of bringing local and sustainable foods to students on campus. This relationship also provides an outlet for products and a financial investment to local farms.

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The creation of my thesis project took many months of planning and idea generation before I settled on something that felt right. I knew that I wanted to create an action-based project, something that would somehow better the university, community, and lives of students, but I wasn't sure where to go with the project. My initial idea was the creation of a large-scale composting system or biological digester at Second Harvest Food Bank on Old State Road 3 in Muncie. I had planned to apply for grants for the project and garner community support, and I hoped that the culmination of these efforts would result in a functional product that would reduce waste, provide a valuable source of nutrients for a future farm proposed for the property, and save Second Harvest money that they are currently spending on trash pick-up charged on a per-pound basis. After returning from studying abroad in Costa Rica in April 2013 and having worked on the creation of a composting project at the biological reserve where I was studying, I questioned whether or not the project at Second Harvest would be the best use of my efforts. Its success was fully contingent on my ability to get funding through grants, and I decided that basing the whole project on monies that might not materialize was not the best option.

Staying with my initial goal, I tried to come up with other ideas that would benefit the three main parties in Muncie with whom I was concerned: the local community, the campus, and students. My second idea came about in conjunction with an immersive learning project in which I participated at the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry in fall 2013. As part of the creation of our film documentary on sustainable farming, the class took part in other community based projects. The one I chose to work on was with a community group called CLUCK (Citizens for Legal Urban Chicken Keeping) that wanted to encourage the city government to change preexisting ordinances in order to allow chickens to be housed in the yards of residential homes within the city of Muncie. This project really excited me; I thought it would be an excellent way for the Muncie community to increase its agricultural literacy and local food production as well as encourage students at Ball State to become engaged in activism and invested in issues that directly affect the Muncie community. Thirdly, I thought that a change in this ordinance might help open the pathways for the potential start of a university farm at Ball State which could increase the experiential learning of several programs on campus, including that of the Natural Resources and Environmental Management major. At the start of this project, I felt hopeful for

the outcome. I am fairly well connected within the Muncie foodie/sustainability community, and I thought those connections could prove instrumental in creating a coalition to change the local poultry ordinance. After two unsuccessful community meetings, I came to understand that the Muncie community was not yet prepared to band together and make these changes. As much as I wanted this ordinance altered, I could not make folks in the community, those who are directly impacted by the law, care about this issue in the course of the few short months I had to complete the project.

To get a successful thesis project off the ground, I decided I needed to work with connections and knowledge I'd already obtained on a problem I'd already faced. Throughout my time at Ball State, one area that I have found very troubling is the university's office of Dining Services. For students who are concerned and aware of the issues with the global food movement, the actions of Dining in terms of food sourcing, sustainability, and even healthy and affordable options leave quite a bit to be desired. From many students I spoke to about these issues, I heard the complaint that Dining was relatively uninterested in these concerns. Many students have spoken with Dining about issues like composting of food scraps, incorporation of vegetables grown on local farms, and inclusion of more recycling bins. All of these conversations ended in confrontation and zero progress. Lots of discouraged students walked away from Dining feeling that their concerns were not being heard and that sustainability-related initiatives were relatively hopeless to pursue. As a student who had never personally contacted Dining, I had no first-hand experience with the situation, and my opinion of their response to students was built solely on hearsay.

As part of the research for the immersive learning project which I was part of, another student and I decided to meet with Dining to see if we could create some type of action within the unit to make sustainability more of a priority. Before we could propose changes, we obviously needed to know where Dining was on these issues, so we met with the Purchasing Manager for Dining Services. Through this conversation, I was able to hear first-hand about some of the initiatives Dining was trying to implement in order to be more sustainable. Unfortunately, there is no delegated staff person within Dining Services whose primary role is ensuring the sustainability

of the organization. One individual does deal with sustainable initiatives, but her primary role is as Marketing Coordinator. Because her duties in her chief role occupy so much of her energy, she is not able to devote the necessary time and effort to significantly improve Dining Services' sustainability. Additionally, Ball State's food purchasing is done through a software system that only allows contracting with large-scale companies and does not leave room for smaller-scale procurement of food.

The thing that most surprised me about my meeting with the Purchasing Manager for Dining was her fear of us as students. When we walked into the room for our meeting, the first thing that she said was, "I hope you aren't here to interrogate me." She didn't make this statement in a rude tone; she was genuinely afraid of how we would approach and question her about the practices in the dining halls. At this moment, I realized that if any progress were to be made in the relationship between students and Dining Services, it would require a level of cooperation and understanding between both parties that did not previously exist.

As I was coming to understand the situation within Dining Services and the necessity of students to lead the way for change, I also confronted the fact that I was a second semester senior preparing to leave Ball State and head on to new activities. I felt that in my time remaining at Ball State, I could create the framework for relationships between local farms and the university. My hope is that these initial connections will turn into longstanding and beneficial relationships in the coming years both for the university and for local farms. My overall goal for my thesis became to aid Dining Services in the pursuit of a more sustainable food procurement system through doing the dirty work of locating producers in the area, finding out what types and quantities of products they have available, and making that contact information and initial correspondence accessible to Dining Services.

Sustainability is a term that is often used loosely--it has many meanings and interpretations depending on the particular situation and context in which it operates. Because of its various definitions, claims about sustainability should always be questioned until the meaning of the word is clear. From my exploration of sustainability throughout college, I have come to form my

own definition of sustainability, particularly in relation to food. A sustainable system is one that operates with equal consideration of many different perspectives. The system must be environmentally conscious, economically viable, socially responsible, and consider cultural perspectives in its operations. This definition asserts that in various settings and locations, even within one state, sustainability could look very different.

I was hopeful that I would be able to start the process of working toward a more sustainable food procurement system because I knew that Ball State University has made increasingly ambitious commitments to environmental consciousness and sustainability as priorities for the future of the college over the past several years. At Ball State, one of the most significant ways that sustainability has been explored is in the context of energy. The concept of sustainable energy has informed the development of a number of methods at Ball State. Around campus, several buildings are LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified, meaning that the structures take into consideration a number of factors such as water use, green materials, and energy efficiency in their operations. Additionally, many of the vehicles for transportation throughout the university and surrounding area operate on renewable forms of power, utilizing energy sources such as biodiesel and hybrid electric power. Furthermore, a number of campus groups such as COTE (Council on the Environment) discuss ways to implement a variety of environmentally friendly techniques in the area of sustainable energy. All of the emphasis on sustainable energy at Ball State recently culminated in the establishment of the new geothermal project, the largest of its kind anywhere in the country. Not only will this project reduce the campus's carbon footprint by almost fifty percent, it will also create over 2,000 jobs and save the university nearly two million dollars annually.

The recent strides made by the university in the realm of clean energy is incredibly impressive, but for Dining Services, sustainability has heretofore been much less of a priority. Of all of the areas on campus, however, the dining halls are possibly the most important place to implement sustainable methods because of the huge quantities of people that interact with Dining on a daily basis. Energy is a relatively intangible and hard-to-grasp concept, but food items are completely corporeal and visceral substances. People can connect with food in a way that is much more

physical and real than many other concepts in sustainability. However, many potential actions that Dining Services could take to become more sustainable are extremely costly and require collaboration across a wide variety of units. For example, in the case of composting, universities of similar sizes to Ball State, such as Ohio University, have put in composting systems that cost nearly one billion dollars. Mass processing of compostable goods would require extensive collaboration between Dining Services and Facilities Management as well as the addition of new employees and operation practices in order to ensure success of the project. While Ball State does take some actions to improve the sustainability of the dining halls such as recycling frying oil and using compostable dinnerware, there is much more to be done, particularly in the arena of food sourcing.

At a university as large as Ball State, vast quantities of food are being brought in on a daily basis in order to feed the more than 30,000 individuals passing through campus. At many universities across the United States, this task is handled by a dining service provider such as Sodexo, Bon Appetit, or Aramark. Because Ball State does not use one of these providers and instead handles food sourcing in-house, they are in a unique position to make rapid and wide-sweeping changes to the way that they procure food without worrying about contractual agreements and the policies of a third party. Similarly to many schools, however, Ball State uses a software purchasing program through which food can be bought in large quantities from companies like Tyson. The products then conveniently show up on a pre-determined date, billing is quick and simple, and all of this with no more than the click of a button. For purchasing from small-scale producers in the region, though, this technology is not helpful. Not only are small-scale producers typically not enrolled in software programs such as these, but they also lack the man power to deal with purchasing arrangements in this manner. However, if intentional decisions were made to incorporate small-scale, local production into the food sourcing policies at Ball State, the impacts on the local economy and the fate of small scale farmers in East Central Indiana could be huge.

Currently, Ball State's procurement does not operate in a way that particularly benefits East Central Indiana. Much of the food that students eat at Ball State comes from large-scale producers, meaning that social, environmental, and health concerns are likely not a major

consideration in the production of these goods. Additionally, the further the food system is from consumers, the less they understand it. This shift of food production away from the hands of individuals and into the grasp of corporate America has led to the average consumer having less of an understanding about how food is grown and also basic nutritional information than at any other time in history.

Ball State University currently uses local sourcing for about one fifth of the produce it brings to campus. Unfortunately, the university's definition of local is a bit different than one might imagine. For the university as well as many other large-scale retailers, such as Walmart, local food can originate from several states away or even farther. This overextended definition for "local" makes the word mean about as much as "sustainable," really very little. For produce at Ball State, "local" means that the produce must come from within Indiana or from a state that borders it. Though purchasing food from neighboring states may seem better than purchasing from producers in other countries, truly local purchasing could nearly eliminate shipping costs, help the environment, and boost the local economy.

Ball State University Dining Services is in a very advantageous place to make a powerful statement about the importance of local procurement of goods, and the necessity for those goods to be produced in a manner that is socially, environmentally, and financially viable. In East Central Indiana, Ball State University is one of the most significant employers and the number one employer in Delaware County, and 21,000 students, not to mention their families, friends, and other visitors, walk through the halls of Ball State each day. As an educational institution, this gives the university a unique opportunity to inform the general public about local and sustainable purchasing and the empowering effect it can have on a community like Muncie.

I feel that this mission is particularly valuable here in Muncie because of the city's deep agricultural history. Prior to the Indiana Gas Boom in the 1890s, the majority of people living in this region utilized agriculture as their primary source of economic stability. It was also here in Muncie that the Ball family first put down their roots and began mass-producing the glass mason jars originally intended for food preservation. At one time, local people could even drop their

fresh produce off at the corporation to be canned in a sanitary and efficient manner. The Indiana Gas Boom brought about an increase in the numbers of industrial factories in this region and thus took people out of their fields and into factories. As the economy in the area recessed throughout the end of the twentieth century, people lost their factory jobs. It is now time to revitalize the socioeconomic scene in this city. One way to do that is through opportunities for folks to get back out into the fields and begin to farm again.

To begin to tackle this problem, I have created a partnership between local sustainable farmers and the university to provide one meal each month to one location on campus for the fall semester that features local products. Though this is only a small step toward local procurement, I hope it will mark the beginning of a relationship between the university and the regional farming community that will continue to grow and blossom over the coming years. It is an opportunity to begin a conversation between local producers and one of the largest purchasers of raw foodstuffs in this region.

Conversations with regional producers were relatively easy for me to begin because of my connections with the local farming community through spending time with vendors at farmers markets in East Central Indiana and as an employee for Becker Farms. I spoke to a number of people in person about my project idea and then sent out a mass email to 22 different farms inquiring about whether or not they would be interested in sourcing products to Ball State for a meal. In that initial correspondence, I explained that the program would only ask for a one-time commitment, but that I hoped the relationship between local farmers and Ball State University might eventually grow into something more longstanding. I asked for information from farmers about the types and quantities of products they would be able to provide, the length of their growing season, and whether or not they had access to greenhouses, cold frames, and other technology to extend their growing season past what is typical for Indiana. I also inquired into whether or not they would be able to provide transportation for their products to the university, as this would be their responsibility.

I was surprised with the low number of responses I received for the project, and also about the trepidation many farmers seemed to feel toward it. Folks were generally unsure as to whether or not the university could be trusted to provide payment and were uncertain if the time investment of this project would be beneficial for their business. Overall, I received responses from eight farms, four who said they would be interested in participating in the project, and from there I began to communicate with chefs within Dining Services to create menus.

The chefs at Ball State have a repertoire of menus on rotation but also substitute in additional recipes when they find something interesting. For the meals that I have arranged to be served in the fall semester of 2014, meat will be utilized heavily. Since all meat will come to the chefs frozen, it will be much easier to preserve and the chefs will have more flexibility as to when exactly these items will appear in the menu. At this time, each meal option has been assigned to a particular month, but it will be up to the chefs to choose the specific dates each meal will be served within that timeframe.

I created partnerships with three farms for the fall menu. These individuals will be responsible for bringing their specified product to Ball State for drop-off and also have the opportunity to spend the mealtime with the chefs at Ball State sharing information about their farms, growing practices, and expertise to students who partake in their food items. Much communication will continue throughout the growing season and into the start of the school year, and all future communication will be carried out through the Marketing Coordinator in the Office of Dining Services who also handles sustainability issues.

Products will be delivered at the loading dock to the appropriate dining halls at a predetermined time that will be communicated by the Marketing Coordinator for the month during which these products will be required. For each meal, approximately 200 servings will be prepared, and payment will be processed through the accounting office for the individual farms.

The first meal to kick off the season will be served in August. The chef in Woodworth chose to make a caprese salad drizzled with olive oil and balsamic glaze for this initial meal. The

heirloom tomatoes for the salad will be provided by To Tend and To Keep Farm located in Mooreland, Indiana.

The meal for September will take place in the Student Center and will use chicken thighs from Becker Farms, also located in Mooreland. A tandoori chicken thigh with Indian rice pilaf will be served for the noontime meal.

In October, the meal will once again occur in Woodworth, but this time for breakfast. The menu will be eggs benedict on a potato pancake, and the eggs will be supplied by Pinehurst Farm in Daleville, Indiana.

In November, the lunchtime meal in the Student Center will be ginger soy seared duck breast served with a roasted bok choy salad and topped with Asian BBQ sauce. The duck breast for this recipe will come from Becker Farms.

For the final meal in December, a chicken and swiss casserole will be served in Noyer. For this recipe, chefs will use whole chickens from Pinehurst and Becker Farms.

Overall, I feel that the program that I have designed for local food options on the fall semester menu will help to move Dining Services to a more sustainable system. The program that I've designed meet my four criteria for sustainability in some important ways. The producers of the local ingredients that will be utilized to make these meals practice environmentally conscious methods, such as rotational grazing and multi-speciation. Also, these food items will travel only a few miles to Ball State University, which means that they will be responsible for fewer greenhouse gasses than food items that travel longer distances. The purchase of these food items is socially responsible because care is taken to ensure that workers at these farms are not exposed to harmful chemicals, the animals were treated in a humane manner, and consumers can feel confident purchasing and eating these products because of the methods used to raise them. The purchase of these foods is also economically viable because the farmers are receiving fair payment for their products, payment that represents the true value of raising crops and animals in an equitable, environmentally beneficial, and small-scale manner. By putting together meals

including locally grown ingredients, the staff of Dining Services is also catering to the particular cultural needs of college students, a group who would not likely be purchasing or cooking food independently. This program will give this group the opportunity to support the local economy and local farmers simply by eating on campus.

Though it saddens me that I will not be at Ball State next year to enjoy these meals, I am pleased to hand this project over to the Office of Dining Services and hope that the relationships formed between the institution and these farms will continue into the future. Dining has been very cooperative and supportive in the formation of this project, and they appear excited to be working with local farms and have the desire to continue purchasing from these business and others within Indiana. Because the Marketing Coordinator for Dining is also my primary contact with this project, she will create advertisements through printed brochures and flyers, social media, and university webmail to promote these events. I will stay in contact with her and help with the completion of the project in any way that I can.

In addition to opening the lines of communication between local producers and the staff of Dining Services, I am hopeful that I have aided in the development of a more productive relationship between Dining Services and students. In order to ensure that this relationship continues to grow, I have enlisted the help of several students within the Natural Resources and Environmental Management department and the Sustainability minor who will continue their studies at Ball State University in the coming years. I connected these individuals with community members, advocates within Ball State's faculty and staff, and other folks who will be great assets to them in making changes happen within the food culture of Ball State. I also introduced them to the nationally recognized organization Real Food Challenge that could help them in increasing Ball State's local and sustainable procurement. Real Food Challenge has a program toolkit to aid students in transitioning their universities away from industrial food purchasing and into more local and sustainable options for sourcing. The Real Food Challenge model currently operates at 20 universities throughout the United States, and those numbers are rapidly expanding. My expectation is that the students I recruited will work alongside Real Food

Challenge and local advocates in order to continue the progress that I made through my thesis work.

From my communication with the Office of Dining Services, I have heard lots of interest in working with students in the future to plan new initiatives and begin continuing the push for sustainable, local, and creative options within Dining. I hope that my involvement with Dining has proven to them that communication with students can be rewarding, cooperative, and successful so long as both parties choose to behave in a manner that is respectful and understanding. With students leading the push for increased sustainable and local purchasing, and the university interested in expanding its claim of environmental consciousness, there could not be a more perfect time for this partnership to take shape.